

IDENTITY CRISIS: THE LESBIAN AND GAY EXPERIMENTAL FILM FESTIVAL



Decodings was one of two films by Michael Wallin presented at the second New York Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival.

Courtesy filmmaker

Tom Kalin

In darkened auditoriums we learn the cool protected distance of the voyeur, while at home, in living rooms, we learn the intimacy of TV as furniture and friend. In the movies (and at home) we are shown a parallel world that is both familiar and alien.

population—that mythical group the mass media claims to address—the question of a gay presence, if asked at all, appears irrelevant. For the rest of us, the experience of reading the words “general population” coupled with recent history—such as the Vietnam War—provides a

panel discussion provided a sorely needed public forum, tackling the thorny question, “Does radical content require radical form?” But the

THE INDEPENDENT

any necessary but the question of a “homosexual identity”—gay or lesbian. For the so-called general

length—constituted less a curatorial statement than an attempt to make a range of work visible. The 1988 festival was only the second edition of this unique event and the addition of a

determined by the specific social and political conditions in which both are formed. Even to speak of a “gay identity” is for the most part a First World privilege, and such discussion can easily overshadow the equally important aspects of class, race, gender, and experience which comprise any

no talk), and straights (lots of talk, simulated sex) without significantly questioning these categories. Touted as causing a "near riot" in San Francisco (presumably for the rather tame simulated tea room sex), Onodera's film relies on our knowledge of stereotypes for its humor but stops short of making a social critique or providing alternatives to typecast sexuality.

Similarly, *Kamikaze Hearts* uses the clichés of the porn industry to examine those who live within it. Attempting to "hurt the voyeur" by reducing our protected distance from the actresses and allowing her audience a strong identification with Tigr, who is both a character in the film and an actual person working as a porn producer/actress, Bashore refuses to ignore the complex and historic interconnections between sex work and lesbian culture. But Bashore also editorializes on the porn industry, using devices that emphasize isolation and artifice. We see Tigr and her lover Mitch trapped under ladders, pinned under cameras, as well as Tigr directing Mitch during a sex scene. Presenting a difficult blend of fiction, documentary, and morality play, the film ends with a cynical vision of alienated sexuality—wagging her needle at the camera after they shoot cocaine, Mitch taunts, "This is my dick. I fucked her with my dick, and she loved it."

Several other films in the festival attempted to directly confront questions of social identity, among them Michael Wallin's *Decodings* and *The Place between Our Bodies* and Robert Gates and Lynn Wyatt's *Communication from Weber*. All three share a recognition of the varied ways in which we make ourselves up out of bits of movies and magazines, unconsciously creating slivered and contradictory personae from a world of role models. Although made 13 years apart, both of Wallin's films deal with a persistent yet contradictory vision of the body, at once "free" sexually while controlled socially. *Decodings* presents an even paced collection of archival footage accompanied by a long, unadorned narration and music by Shostakovich. Wallin does more than quote the medical training films and stock dramas he has retrieved from the vaults, however. By conflating images from the world outside with personal, anecdotal experience he shows how deeply branded we are by the world of images and the signs of social coercion—a point made in scenes of open heart surgery, boys boxing blindfolded, mechanical arms with hooks instead of fingers fastening suit buttons, cars leaping through fire, and so on. On the soundtrack, a man's voice speaks about psychological collapse, boyhood homoerotic games of goosing, official sounding medical diagnoses, and oral sex in the desert with a Marine. *Decodings* delineates some of the overlaps of militarism and sexuality, medical examination and child's play, offering a reminder of how we can become alienated from our skin even as we live in it. As spectators we watch the distinction between our own lives and the fictions of film become blurred, indistinct. Wallin's earlier film,

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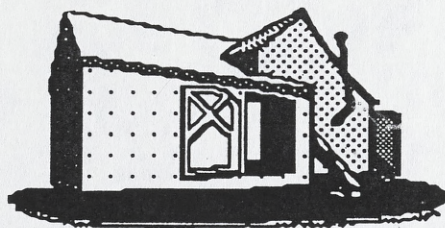
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The Place between Our Bodies, begins by contemplating the standard definition of gay male identity circa 1975 as promiscuous, absorbed in the consuming world of pornography. As the film unfolds however, it yields to a celebration of the possibility of a relationship. Hardly polished—and often uncomfortable—the film pictures explicit sex but cannot be reduced to pornography.

During both the screenings of *The Place between Our Bodies* that I attended an AZT beeper happened to go off in the audience, a signal not only to a person with AIDS to take medication but also a sign of just how long ago 1975 seems. *A.I.D.S.C.R.E.A.M.*, by Jerry Tartaglia, and *No Photo Required*, by Larry Brose, expressed rage and a recognition of the feelings of victimization that result from AIDS. Unfortunately, both did this without admitting the possibility of effective activist resistance. A third film about AIDS in the festival—*Catching Fire*, a dramatic narrative film along the lines of a daytime soap—added nothing to the discussion of the issues at least raised by Tartaglia's and Brose's films. In contrast to these films, *The Place between Our Bodies* crudely yet effectively states a case for the importance of picturing gay and lesbian sex, countering the prevailing social climate that counsels abstinence, just saying "no." However, *Communication from Weber* most consistently addressed the question of identity. Gates and Wyatt's film employs a skewed documentary format to unfurl the banner of Albert Michael Weber/Sabina, a self-proclaimed "full-time third sex role transgender person." Weber explains that he initially took up cross-dressing as a masquerade to avoid masturbation, but he came to exploit his confusion of sexual identities as a retaliation against compulsory heterosexual sexism, "to show honestly both deep pain and exploitation of women." At one point, Weber asks his girlfriend to speak to him as both Albert and Sabina, effectively short-circuiting the myth of a coherent persona. At another moment, he shows his slip beneath jeans and flannel work-shirt, confiding that his clothes reveal the entire story of his day. In *Communication* the body becomes the ultimate costume, socially framed and controlled, but still allowing its individual, melancholic voice to speak about alternate life.

The "queer kind of film" that Schulman and Hubbard have helped to cultivate admits such histories, such separate, idiosyncratic voices. Although the festival could have benefitted from programming that depended less on stylistic groupings and attempted to link works conceptually, the categorical structure most likely reflects the prevailing ideas about how to attract a sizable audience to such events. Still, the festival's apparent health in its second year and the fact that it will once again travel around the country are hopeful signs for the future. At the same time, a more thorough survey of gay and lesbian voices might include not just filmmakers but lesbian and gay work in video as well. It might also serve the interests of the festival's audience—or perhaps a wider audience—if the programmers didn't take



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Cooperation of Parts by Daniel Eisenberg , Cambridge , Mass. (42 min.film, entry #478) - The images for Cooperation of Parts were shot in Europe, in 1983. The film begins at a train station in Calais, France, and ends on a street in Radom, Poland. Inbetween are images of Paris, Munich, Dachau, Berlin, Warsaw, and Auschwitz-Beirkenau. Using lists, descriptions of photographs, a catalogue of proverbs, images of streets, trains, ruins, riots, and narrative elements, the film explores the territory of the recent past with a second generation perspective .

Let's Play Prisoners by Julie Zando , Buffalo, NY, (22 minute video, entry 37) - an explorational, structurally based work that addresses the way that power games¹ effect interpersonal relationships as portrayed in a mother-daughter , and subsequently , an adult lover relationship. Poetic voice-over and direct protagonist - delivered text is interspersed with home movie images and contemporary on-location readings in a suburban setting . Let's Play Prisoners demonstrates an interest in analytical interpretation as modelled after Freudian dream work.

Decodings by Michael Wallin, San Francisco, Ca. (15 min. film, entry 501) - an ephemeral, experimental work that employs appropriated film footage referencing the late 1940s early 1950s . It is a spiritually compelling film that conjurs a sense of the past (perhaps a better, simpler era) while avoiding the over-sentimentalization of memory. Beyond the beautiful silvered , concrete imagery and monologue exists an abstract commentary on life and loss of innocence.

Inside Life Outside by Sachiko Hamada and Scott Sinkler, N.Y., N.Y. (57 min. video, entry 554) - This is an intimate video production in the "cinema verite" tradition. It is about the shantytown founded in 1985 on Sixth Street and Avenue C by Delia Torres and Michael Cruzado , longtime residents of the neighborhood and the parents of five children. The videomakers recorded daily life in the shantytown and tracked legal issues encountered by the Torres and Cruzado for two years. The protagonists' strength in the face of disappointment and adversity as well as the cycles² endemic to poverty, deprivation, substance abuse , and disenfranchisement are all revealed in this compelling work .

Screening, Awards Reception Set for December 12

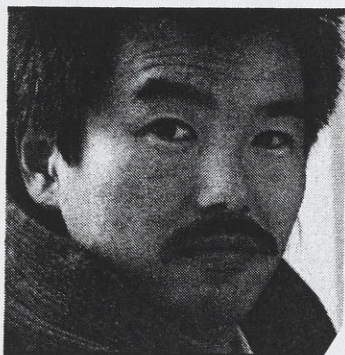
Phelan Filmmaking Award-Winners Interviewed

by Robert Anbian

Curtis Choy, Barbara Hammer and Michael Wallin are the winners of the 1988 James D. Phelan Art Awards in Filmmaking, given for only the third time to California-born filmmakers to recognize high artistic achievement in a body of work. The three will be honored at a reception and screening, Monday, December 12, 7 p.m., at the Kabuki 8 Theatres, Post at Fillmore Streets, in San Francisco. The event is free and open to the public.

The Phelan filmmaking awards are sponsored by The San Francisco Foundation and administered by Film Arts Foundation.

Choy, whose *The Fall of the I Hotel* is the dramatic story of the last stand of a passing generation of Phillipino workers and their allies against a juggernaut of urban development, is known for his community activism and politically-engaged documentary filmmaking. He has made numerous tapes and films on Asian American themes since 1972 and has lectured at local colleges and workshops.



Curtis Choy

A lot of your film work has evolved from community activism. Could you talk about that evolution?

I went to San Francisco State in 1975 with a B.A. in Simultaneous with that I was group in Chinatown called Affirmative Action. I was Chinese Media Commi disseminating English to teach Cantonese English. As part of all kinds of media to distribute the shows...half and calcula' said, "We buy three alone? throw por m

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Barbara Hammer

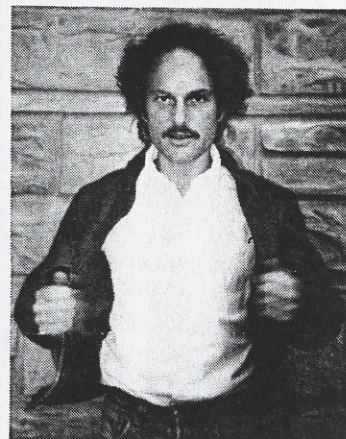
Hammer has been making short, experimental films since 1973. Her work has been widely recognized. She had a one-person Cine Probe show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City and a 1986 retrospective at the Berlin International Film Festival. Her early works explicitly concerned radical feminist and lesbian perspectives. More recently she has sought a broader synthesis of political consciousness and visual language in the context of a self-aware yet nature-centered cinema.

Wallin has been a filmmaker since the late 60s when he studied with Bruce Baillie, James Broughton and Peter Kubelka. His intensely personal, autobiographical works seek a kind of metaphoric transformation in the manipulated film image. His most recent works are *Monitoring the Unstable Earth*, *Along the Way* and *Decodings*.

Panelists for this year's Phelan awards were filmmaker and editor Nathaniel Dorsky; filmmaker and cinematographer, Emiko Omori; and critic and lecturer Christine Tamblyn.—RA

Your newest film, Decodings, made from found footage, would seem to be a bit of a departure for you.

It is a departure for me. It seemed like more of a departure when I began to



Michael Wallin

make the film. I collected the footage from which the film was constructed over a period of several years and finally realized I had enough interesting material to work with. I thought I might try my hand at a film that's found footage and collage. There are people who have done this rather successfully, Bruce Conner among them, of course. With *Along the Way*, the film prior to *Decodings*, I had explored filming, camera and editing strategies and I just wanted to do something entirely different.

A number of interesting things happened as I was making the film. One tends to fall in love with all of your footage, or the bulk of it. I felt the editing process for *Decodings* would be much

Wallin, continued on page 9

Wallin, continued from page 7

easier because I would be able to be more ruthless with this footage because it wasn't my own. As it happened, that wasn't the case. Actually, it became my own. I pored through thousands of feet of film from hundreds of films, old documentaries, educational films, science films, newsreels, and after I had collected an hour's worth of footage, it once again became a very difficult process to pare it down to create the kind of editing rhythms and juxtapositions of images that would suggest themes or feelings that I wanted....Once that transformation had occurred, *Decodings* as a departure from my other work became less so. What guided my initial choice of images were two elements. One was a more formal element in terms of the composition within the frame of the image. I showed a lot of images that had a grid to them. A lot came from animated science films or other kinds of science films, sports films, where there was a strong cross hatching. The other basic formal strategy seemed to be, I was drawn to images of hands, mid-shots from the chest down to the knees. The educational and science films tended to have shots of that sort. I like that incomplete quality...you couldn't see a person's face which is the most expressive element about a person. After that I began noticing I was drawn to images of young boys, teenagers, young men, involved in different activities, mostly sports or group activities, male sorts of activities...things men in this culture have grown up doing together.

At what point did the text enter the film?

Once I discovered I was drawn to certain kinds of images I realized what the film would be about....I decided to hone in on particular ideas using music and also a text that I asked a friend of mine, Michael Blumlein, who writes fantasy and science fiction, to write for me. I provided him with a written piece of my own suggesting the kinds of ideas that were to be incorporated in his piece. What I wrote was a kind of psycho-sexual-emotional portrait of myself, autobiographical in nature, which I thought was too naked, in a sense. I wanted something that would be more on the level of metaphor, something that would resonate for a broader audience. So I had to develop characters, vignettes, anecdotes, parables...and he produced a very poetic and strong text for the film.

In several of your films words are important. You quote poets, you use voice over text. Can you say something about your use of words?

Well, they are important and they're not important at the same time. One film is silent although it does begin with a couple of references to William Carlos Williams and Robert Creeley. And at the same time it basically denies the importance of words. The Robert Creeley quote is something about . . . what was the Williams one?

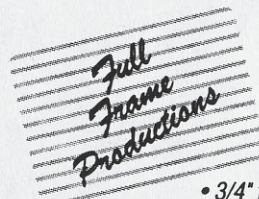
"No ideas but in things."

Thank you. In *Along the Way*, for example, there are four sections with spoken narration. The narration is anecdotal and diaristic....But I wanted to try to bring to it some formal cinematic elements...ways I had been experimenting with shooting, single framing using the aperture, playing with light and a lot of the element of composition, that I had developed with *Fearful Symmetry* and *Monitoring the Unstable Earth*. I feel that my

primary interest in film is visual. I always, without exception, work with images and then bring sound to those images if I feel they need it. I like to use sound so I usually feel images benefit from it. But in *Fearful Symmetry* there was no sound; I felt the rhythm of the images was strong enough that a soundtrack would be redundant or take away from the power of the imagery. *Sleepwalk* was a film that was made at a time when I was very interested in a Russian mystic philosopher named Gurdjieff and his student Ouspensky. I was reading a lot of their works and was interested to see if I could explore in a film...an idea they had of how an individual's personality, which is expressed in their characteristics and gestures and manners of speaking, can be so reified or solidified or objectified that a person can in a sense identify with themselves...become conscious of their own beings. I decided to explore those kinds of physical gestures and vocal mannerisms. I carefully observed several friends of mine and observed three who have distinctive ways of using their hands, of which they were entirely unconscious. The film began as three portraits and then I began to break down the expectation an audience might be having of the film, namely a film of portraits of friends...using optical printing to extract or pick up on the particular gestures that were so characteristic of these three friends...it became a dance of gestures. The idea for Gurdjieff would be to look at yourself and understand yourself and see how you become unconscious of the way you move and speak and for him I suppose it's a critique. But for me the film became paradoxical because it was a very charming film. It was kind of a tribute to these three wonderful people.

Wallin, continued on page 17

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group...two dead women. Maya Deren and Marie Mencken. Maybe Shirley Clarke is in there. But there needs to be a reevaluation of experimental film so that feminism is brought into the culture as a whole. I think everything should be opened up again and looked at. I have said that about the narrative form being a patriarchal structure because the books that I've read on how to write a screenplay are written by men, they follow an industrial code that's very much dominated by men, and who owns the money in the country and distributes the film but men? Most of the films historically have been seen from a man's point of view. The camera locates the woman as an object to be looked at, the lighting highlights her dowdiness or soft focuses her glory and her beauty. The ordinary life of the woman in the world, the person who is behind the scenes keeping the culture together, knitting and making the food and sweeping the sidewalks, isn't shown. I'm not saying all women's cinema is this housekeeping kind of cinema but that's one aspect of an ordinary life. Until we get *Jeanne Dielmann*, Chantal Akerman's film...it's three hours, and 20 minutes to boil potatoes. Skin them, cut them up and boil them. That takes place during the time of the film, that's a revolutionary narrative cinema. But it isn't within that patriarchal code of the 90 minute film. It runs on for three hours because woman's time might be different time. But now I wouldn't even generalize and say women. Each of us is so different and there are womanisms and feminisms...we found our differences through the movement and our arguments pretty much spelled them out. But the formula represents the culture of diversion, entertainment, the turn of the plot point, plot points are male points. I mean, I love sex but it doesn't have to do with climaxes *per se*, points where everything reaches up and then it turns in another direction.

You're saying narrative cinema reflects men's emotional economy?

That's better put than I said it. I read about men but I hesitate to generalize...there are different kinds of gender training that would make for different experiences and for a different way of approaching film.

You've said the woman's body was the center of your films and that you changed that to nature, in part, to avoid voyeurism.

It's really a complex change. It has to do with more than voyeurism of the film which I wasn't able to control as much as I tried to control it by using an active presence. I was in the film itself, I held the camera, I was the subject, I couldn't be the object. I used older women or women who didn't fit the Greco-Roman model of beauty, who had character and presence and strengths that usually weren't seen in cinema. Then the films weren't written about because feminist film theory, and I identified myself as a feminist, was based first of all on re-reading dominant Hollywood codes and didn't pay any attention to experimental work. When it got to experimental work it didn't see how the female body could have any place in it without saying that there was a female essence and that this was different from a male essence. This was a deconstructionist way of looking at women's cinema and it took societal norms and broke them apart and there was absolutely no place for a woman's body on the screen given that kind of heady material coming out from about 1975-80. So my work, because the body was the image, was called essentialist or wasn't dealt with. I always felt it was much more than essentialism...I resented being called an essentialist because I never felt like I was. I said

there was an essential femaleness that was different from maleness and often with that would go with characteristics of nature, more emotionality, more spirituality, passion, sort of historically regressive because that's what women were always told. There became a big difference between the social formation of the female and the historical formation and if you identified with nature then all these other labels were applied. Women wanted to reject that and a lot of them did. Today there's still a split. But I have grown to find social construction to be more interesting to me today. That was just one issue. And there was a desire to distance, to not work so closely with my personal life and to use actors....And nature for many people is a place of connecting...a basic connection of being an animal on the planet. I love smell, growth, biology, vegetation. It makes me feel good to hike and walk and be outside. I don't say that that's connected with being female. It's connected with being me. I care about that pond (filmed in *Pond and Waterfall*) at Point Reyes National Seashore Park and so I filmed with that kind of caring to help other people see the beauty.

The one that's been growing in me since this summer when I went to New Mexico to try to film lightning, which was faster than my Super-8 camera, is something about stasis in movement...that there can be movement all around going at a clippety-clip rate through the projector and there can be a still core in the center of that. I think T.S. Eliot said, "In the still center of the moving world, that's where the dance is." I think it has to do with maturity and finding a very calm place. Because if you look at my films a lot of them are very frantic in a sense, there's a lot of change in them, a lot of fast cutting and movement and dissatisfaction with staying on anything for too long. I like that movement and that's why I chose film to work with, a moving image. But someplace there's a sense of quiet in the middle of all that movement. Δ

Wallin, continued from page 9

I'd say that your concerns as a filmmaker are spiritual, even mystical...like the Symbolist poets with their correspondences.

I think that's true. I'm not comfortable with the word symbol because that seems restrictive, overly determinate, something standing for something else. Metaphor comes a little closer. But I do think there is an overriding kind of mystical or spiritual concern. In the films before *Decodings*, going back to *Kali's Revue* made in 1972, I feel that part of what I'm attempting to do, which is what all experimental filmmakers are attempting to do, is to create a new cinematic language for seeing. Particularly to allow the viewer to see in a way that normally would evade the senses. I'm very interested in the Eastern perspective, those elements of spirituality. Films like *Kali's Revue*, *Monitoring the Unstable Earth* and *Fearful Symmetry* try to use cinematic technique, ways of filming what's out there, my world, your world, our world, in a way that it can't be seen...a way of appreciating images in terms of their innate qualities of texture and color and shade, as opposed to what those things are or...how they serve in the overall narrative of the film. Wait, I just remembered the Creeley one. "Things are as they are. They're not like anything else."

In Decodings did you miss using the structuralist language that figures prominently in your other recent works?

No, not really. As much as I'm involved with those kinds of techniques, I'm also very powerfully drawn to the statement a

very simple, unadulterated image can make...just in terms of the composition in the frame, what occurs in a few seconds in that image, how that image can join to other images. That's plenty to work with. Especially with these kinds of images. I find them very evocative and powerful in their own right so I'm not particularly motivated to alter them. I showed people the work in progress and a few suggested playing with the images a little more, they're too straightforward, try repeating, or changing the frame, or whatever. They were filmmakers.

How did you start off on this road? A conversion experience?

Yes. In high school I saw the then-banned film by Jean Genet, *Un Chant D'Amour*. It was a powerful, powerful experience both sexually and cinematically....I was in high school and I was taken to see it by my parents. I don't think they quite expected what it would be. But that film to me suggested the real power of non-narrative cinema, of imagistic cinema, of poetic cinema. Then, also in high school, I saw Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising* which just blew me away. When I went to Yale, I happened to be exposed to a terrific film series with filmmakers brought in by P. Adams Sitney who is now considered the main theoretician of the avant garde. He was a graduate student at Yale and was bringing in filmmakers like Ken Jacobs, Gregory Markopoulos, Michael Snow and Stan Brakhage. I did a few experiments in 8mm at Yale, and subsequent to that, in 1968, which was a real turning point for me, I studied with Bruce Baillie and lived with him and became a kind of apprentice to him in Mendocino for that summer. He was making a very amazing film at the time called *Quick Billy* which I actually assisted with a little bit, with the camerawork. I made my first films there in Mendocino. By that time I was convinced that this was the niche of filmmaking I wanted to explore. Then I decided to attend San Francisco State graduate film school. It's orientation certainly was not consonant with my own. But there were people there, James Broughton, Fred Padula, who were more experimentally oriented. I took the best film course I ever had from James Broughton.

In terms of what, as a student, you imagined it would be to be an experimental filmmaker, how has it turned out?

I've gone through a lot of phases in terms of my relationship to the field of experimental film and the dubious satisfaction I derive from my work. Initially I felt that there were filmmakers who were established or becoming established, Bruce Conner, Stan Brakhage, Michael Snow, Kenneth Anger and so on. I thought, well, I'm part of the next generation and we too will make our mark and it's only a matter of time and perseverance and luck and our names will be in the books and we'll be talked about in classrooms. It didn't quite happen that way. What did happen is that the first generation of experimental filmmakers became ensconced as a pantheon of demi-gods, which is fine, they're great filmmakers. But people tend to see everything that followed as derivative. So for my generation of filmmakers it's really been an uphill struggle for recognition. I did a major tour with my films around the country in 1973 which was extremely gratifying and I got a lot of attention. Now, finally I've completed another film after several years of relative inactivity and it seems to be getting a good deal of attention so I feel once again that my vision or my ideas, my aesthetic is being appreciated. I don't have any illusions of fame or notoriety.

What's the future hold for Michael Wallin?

I've been considering for some years writing a screenplay. I've been putting down ideas, not a regular narrative screenplay. *Decodings* is probably the most narrative of the films I've ever made except for one lip-sync, Andy Warholish soap opera I produced in film school. But I'm interested in working with some friends who are actors and I would like to make a short narrative film that incorporated experimental technique and yet does tell a story, perhaps my own story, or deals with issues that are important to me in my life now in a way different from how *Decodings* dealt with them. Δ

Letters, continued from page 2

He could make crap like *Rambo Conquers Noriega* but he prefers to make wonderful personal works that U.S. distributors overlook. Fortunately foreign distributors and audiences appreciate U.S. independent features, so film artists can survive selling their work abroad. (And PBS loves English TV shows....)

There are no easy solutions to the U.S. distribution problems facing independent filmmakers. Perhaps a more liberal government will someday fund a national cinema program and provide major cities with theatres that exhibit independently-produced films. Perhaps an alternative to PBS will be developed that promotes these works. Until then, be thankful to live in one of the few areas on the U.S. where a wide variety of film and video is available.

—Karl Cohen, San Francisco

FAF ANNOUNCEMENTS

RP Deadlines: copy deadline for the February *Release Print* is Thursday, January 5; for classified and display advertising is Monday, January 9.

The FAF offices will be closed December 13 & 14 for a staff retreat; December 23 & 26 for Christmas; and January 2 for New Year's.

Many thanks for office help to Lois Haggerty, Jan Ankerson, Erica Marcus, Celeste Necochea, Sylvie Carnot, Chris Maher, Luz Castillo and Lani Asher; for help with seminars and workshops to Paul Lundahl, Mark Redpath, Liz Kotz, Trip Baldwin, David Lynstrom, Harriet Koskoff, Melissa Howden, Chris Maher, Lois Haggerty, Paul Barkley and Kelly Clement; for help in the Editing Facility to Jeff Maxwell, Stephanie Wasserman, and Tom Burg for the homemade preserves.

MEMBERS IN THE NEWS

Awards & Honors: Jack Walsh has received a Jerome Grant for his first narrative project, *The Second Coming*.

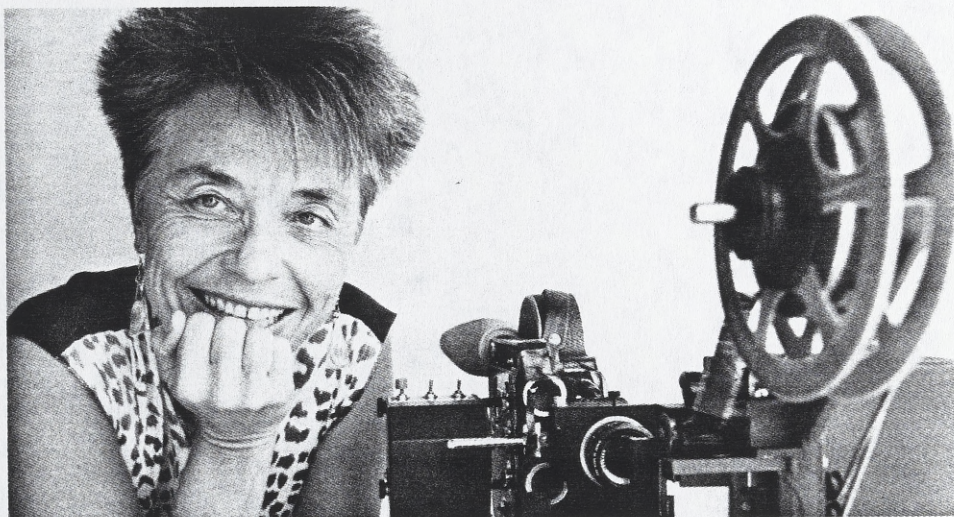
Screenings Near & Far: Karil Daniels' *Water Baby: Experiences of Water Birth* was recently broadcast over Gostelradio, Soviet state television, as part of a *Documentary Themes* series which boasts an average audience of 50 million...videotapes by Lynn Hershman play at L.A.C.E and L.A.C.P.S. in Los Angeles and the Whitney Museum in New York in December and January.

On the Business Scene: Leon Corcos won an Award of Excellence for Individual Achievement in Lighting at the Joey Awards for a Pete's Pizza commercial...Mark Allen picked up a silver "Cindy" and four special achievement awards from the Association of Visual Communicators for a Pacific Bell program.

Three Receive Phelan Award

Three Bay Area filmmakers recently were selected to receive the 1988 James D. Phelan Art Award in Filmmaking. Barbara Hammer, Michael Wallin, and Curtis Choy each received \$2,500, and had a screening of their work at the Kabuki 8 Theatres in San Francisco. This year's Phelan Awards were the third given to independent filmmakers and were established to honor bodies of work by California-born artists.

Ms. Hammer and Mr. Wallin were cited for their work producing experimental movies and videos; Mr. Choy works primarily on documentaries. Their films have ranged in



Barbara Hammer, Phelan Art Award in Filmmaking.

length from three minutes to a half hour or more. All three filmmakers have spent their careers trying to stretch the medium's vocabulary.

"The linear, narrative plot of Hollywood movies isn't appropriate in the late 20th century," said Ms. Hammer. "We need new cultural symbols." Ms. Hammer's interest in fighting against the mainstream filmmakers is ironic. Her grandmother was the cook for

PAT HENRY'S

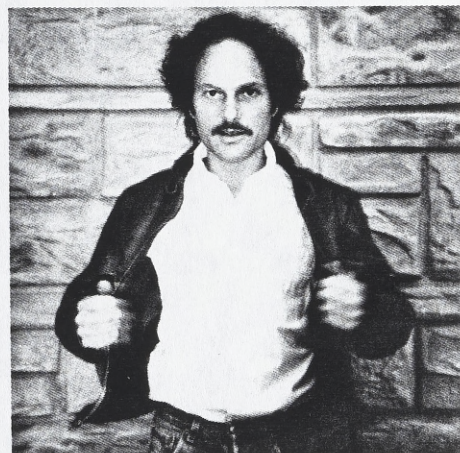
CUE

MAGAZINE

FILM
VIDEO &
TELEVISION
PRODUCTION
IN
NORTHERN
CALIFORNIA

January '89

Volume 1, Number 11 \$2.50



Michael Wallin, Phelan Art Award in Filmmaking.

film pioneer D.W.Griffith, and early in life, her mother tried to groom her to be the next Shirley Temple. But Ms. Hammer rebelled against trying to emulate those icons.

"Hollywood is interested in the one-dimensional. But people experience things multi-dimensionally. I could be in New York physically, but my memory could be focused on my being in Boston. I try to move people physiologically."

Mr. Wallin concurs with Ms. Hammer's assessment of commercial filmmaking. "I try to exploit the movies' unique potential for

aesthetic pleasure in a way that doesn't mimic theatre or a novel. Filmmaking is more like poetry or painting. My work has been described as marking out a topographical cinema."

Both artists cited examples of their approach to filmmaking. "I usually just carry my camera with me," said Mr. Wallin. "I collect images which strike me visually, over a period of months and sometimes years. I don't start with a prescribed script; I'll review what I've filmed and put it together. I use an Eastern perspective — a detached objectivity to what's around me. People are just part of the landscape. Finally, I try to give a sense of animation to what are actually static objects."

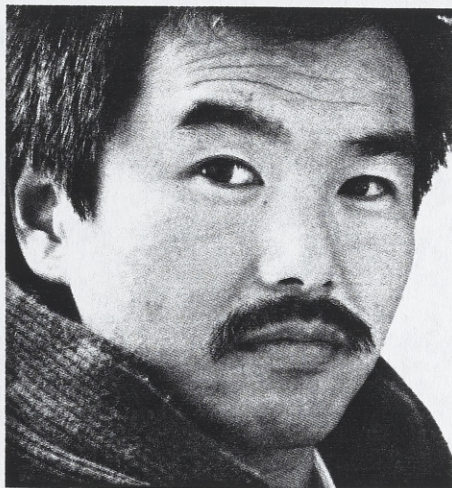
Mr. Wallin's most recent work, "Decodings," is a "collage film," as he puts it. It is made up of scenes from old documentaries from the 1940s to early '60s. "The shots I found that I had extracted were those of boys, teenagers, young men, doing what is commonly called 'male bonding,'" he laughed. "It's an autobiographical film, so to speak. It's a sexual, emotional look at myself." A friend of his, a writer of fantasy stories, wrote dialogue which is read against those images by a poet, to the music of Shostakovich.

Ms. Hammer, on the other hand, got special permission to film in the Hearst Castle swimming pool. "The lens is half in and half out of the water," she said. "After all, that's how people see, not just one or the other."

Her most recent film, entitled "Endangered," is a meditation on the plight of the experimental film as a genre. "I shot footage in the Galapagos Islands of endangered species, and then I attacked the film stock with hydrochloric acid as well as scratching it. The film itself is endangered in a sense." Ms. Hammer's patience was endangered, too. "I composed each frame of the film by hand. It took me three months to shoot an 18 minute film!"

Mr. Choy's work deals primarily with the Asian-American experience. He is best known for his 1983 film "Fall of the I-Hotel." (Mr. Choy could not be reached for this article.)

All three filmmakers have been working at their craft since the late '60/early '70s.



Curtis Choy, Phelan Art Award in Filmmaking.

Outlets for their art take a lot of work to scout out and secure, but they are there. Ms. Hammer and Mr. Wallin both cited museums and college campuses as fertile grounds in which to exhibit their films. They also rely on houses like the Film Forum in Los Angeles and the Pacific Film Archives in San Francisco to show their films to a loyal and growing audience.

And, of course, there are festivals. Mr.

Wallin's "Decodings" won the Grand Prize at the Thomas Edison Black Maria Film Festival in New Jersey, which is dedicated to exhibiting short films, and has garnered good reviews in publications such as *The Village Voice*. Ms. Hammer had a retrospective of her work at the Berlin International Film Festival and has had showings at the National Museum of Art in Paris. In addition, her work will soon be out in videocassette; 4 one-hour volumes will be released by Facets Multimedia.

The filmmakers agreed that winning the Phelan Award is important not only for the money, which is needed to finance their work, but also for the validation of their work. "It's nice to know my work is being appreciated," said Mr. Wallin. For Ms. Hammer, who is the first woman to receive the Phelan Award, the honor was perhaps especially welcome. As she described, "Women still have to fight prejudice, even in the area of experimental films."

The Phelan Awards are funded by the James D. Phelan Trust and are administered by the Film Arts Foundation. Judges of this year's awards were filmmaker and editor Nathaniel Dorsky, filmmaker and cinematographer Emiko Omori, and Critic and lecturer Christine Tamblyn. Gail Silva, director of the Film Arts Foundation, selected the panel. **CUE**

By Mitchell Kohn

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Counter Currents

Love
Me Gender

Sex. For six packed September evenings at Millennium, 12 programs of films that both realize and remember unabashed, unleashed polymorphous sexuality were shown, part of the Second New York Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival. Sexuality that, in the wake of AIDS, refuses to take a cold shower, affirming once again that the politicization of the personal is imperative.

"I'm in a conscious reality I can't transcend," says the self-proclaimed transgendered Albert Michael Weber/Sabina in Robert Gates and Lynn Wyatt's *Communication From Weber* (1988). Releasing a torrent of homilies, memories, and reflections, Weber/Sabina is the loquacious center of this portrait of a divided self. ("Half of me is always hidden, is suffering.") *Communication* includes both lurid color footage of Sabina in a Roger Corman cheapie and a cinema vérité record of Weber/Sabina at home in a room papered with photos, cartoons, diagrams, legends, graffiti. Standing amid this clutter, Weber asks, "You want to prove I have the other stuff underneath?" Then, remarking that this is "the entire story of the entire day," Weber pulls aside his shirt and pants to reveal Sabina's slip and stockings, voicing a desire to shave her legs: "If I decide, it's not sexist."

Michael Wallin's *Decodings* is a profoundly moving, allegorical search for identity from the documents of collective memory, in this case found footage from the '40s and '50s. Wallin unfolds his parable at a steady, voluptuous pace that is anathema to the compulsion toward hyperkinesis frequently employed with films using found footage. A solitary figure follows a mystical beam of light from above; a sonorous voiceover intones that "danger is not a story for the timid." Tales of wandering and searching are set to images of young boys boxing, praying, playing. Men perform feats of danger and abandon: One dives into water from an impossibly high cliff, another drives through a ring of fire. "The world is full of miracles. We stand up, we lie down, chew, swallow. It seems only natural." The search for self ends in aching poignancy with stills of a boy and his mother at the kitchen table, catching the moment that marks the dawning of anguish and loss; desire becomes imprinted on that which was long ago.

The last film screened at the festival was Wallin's 1975 sexually explicit, erotic meditation on his relationship with a boyfriend, *The Place Between Our Bodies*, a significant declaration against the assault on gay sexuality in the wake of AIDS. A point effectively honed in Jerry Tartaglia's potent, angry *A.I.D.S.C.R.E.A.M.*, in which ominous incantations ("AIDS is the excuse to desexualize gay culture... Four out of five doctors recommend no sex for gay men... Good gays are monogamous and straight-looking...") are juxtaposed with images of men, the voice shockingly revealing that "these are my friends, my dead friends." And, although the paucity of strong new films by women was acutely disappointing, there was the premiere of Barbara

Continued on next page

Wild in the streets:
Krishna/
Chaipau
(Shafiq Syed)



Harried Krishna

BY KATHERINE DIECKMANN

SALAAM BOMBAY! Directed and produced by Mira Nair. Written by Sooni Taraporevala. A story by Nair.

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VOICE

VOL. XXXIII NO. 41 • THE WEEKLY NEWSPAPER OF NEW YORK • OCTOBER 11, 1988 • \$2.00

FILM

doubt will prove a bigger draw than even the most popular Satyajit Ray film.

Nair's story is simple: An abandoned boy named Krishna, or Chaipau (Shafiq Syed), spends his days carrying precarious tea trays up and down spiral staircases in Bombay's labyrinthian alleys, sleeping in the streets with other homeless children at night. Banished by his mother, the adorable and fair-minded Krishna is saving up to return home. His world is populated by a roster of down-in-the-gutter types—a boorish pimp and druglord, Baba (Nana Patekar); Baba's junked-out minion, Chillum (Raghubir Yadav); a needy little girl, Manju (Hansa Vithal), whose family life suggests Krishna may not be missing much; and a naïve virgin, "Sweet 16" (Chanda Sharma), sold into prostitution, whom Krishna falls for with all the unreflected passion of first love. Nair weaves her elements skillfully; Chillum's OD death (and the haunting street funeral that follows) creates a narrative hole soon filled by an extended sequence at a government-run children's camp.

Salaam, Bombay! is most gratifying when Nair draws on her documentary background to bring her film vérité life—like in a movie house scene, when the rowdy street kids ape a tacky, voluptuous screen idol, or in the truthful depiction of hash smoking and petty crime. The director-producer's feel for Bombay life is tex-

Months later, fortunately, I lost that doe-eyed sense of wonder. I became more acquainted with the woman I idolized. As with any of one's heroes, it's more rewarding to see the woman for who she is, especially Kathy, who hated "mythologizing" people and who, in her own words, rejected the notion of being either "saint" or "sinner."

Her work and her presence were a challenge. As a filmmaker, I gauged my own development, to some extent, by asking, "Would I dare show this work to Kathy?" and "Would I feel pleased calling it my own when she saw it?" She refused to be caught up in the labeling of "art," insisting instead on an excellence of craft. She maintained a keen ear for criticism, which only strengthened what she rightfully called "an obsession."

Finished films, plays, or novels can always be retrieved for reading or viewing, but the woman who made them is not so rudely packed away or relegated to repertoire. I feel her absence and find few immediate ways to explain it. It was Kathy's feeling "that all illness is psychic disconnection of some kind." If this holds true, then the illness that took Kathleen Collins is as much a part of one's connection to her as it was the end of her personal struggle.

Kathy was concerned that people understood where she stood as an author. In a 1986 interview with David Nicholson, she said, "You don't get the resolution, but you get the explosive moment. After that, the resolution is not your business. In all my work, I take you to the explosive moment, but that's basically where I leave you."

—William Hudson

"A QUEER KIND OF FILM"

TODD HAYNES

This year, New York City's only forum for new work by lesbian and gay filmmakers was the week-long festival of experimental work, "A Queer Kind of Film," curated by Sarah Schulman and Jim Hubbard. For whatever reason, the higher-profile, feature-oriented New York Gay Lesbian Film Festival did not occur, placing all the more emphasis on its East Village counterpart. Schulman and Hubbard began the festival in 1987 out of a frustration with the limited conventions represented by the more "official" gay festivals. The question posed by this year's group of films—and that comprised the theme of a seminar included in the week—is to what extent a homosexual sensibility in film is articulated in a radical form. Immediately, the term "radical" requires definition, as does "homosexual sensibility." Are we simply radical or homosexual in relation to the dominant mainstream—as if the dominant mainstream was in turn some homogeneous whole from which we have departed? Perhaps the greatest value in the assembling of experimental work by gay filmmakers is in discovering the heterogeneity of such terms, and perhaps, one day, in exhausting them.

The group of films presented here may or may not accomplish this, although the selection was a large and fairly diverse one. The work ranged from the visual complexities and elegance of films by Barbara Hammer and Tom Chomont to the clinical punkiness of Lisa Quay's *Instructional Guide to Vaginal Fisting* (1987). But the films that stood out the most were those that fell outside the sanctioned definitions of experimental film, those that actively comment upon or critically engage elements from the dominant culture rather than creat-

TODD HAYNES is a New York-based filmmaker and a cofounder of Apparatus Productions.

ing idyllic alternatives, and that, by doing so, call into question the elasticity of such categories.

Communications from Weber (1988), by Robert Gates and Lynn Wyatt, is such a film. The subject of this jam-packed documentary is a radically eccentric transvestite named Albert-Michael (and/or Sabina)

of his radios and TVs. "Radio is on 24 hours a day," he says, "which is a random attempt to be free." Weber's theory of synchronicity asserts that "nothing is totally random because matter has a consciousness that is evolving." Like the influx of media and outpouring of notes, thoughts, and sketches, Weber says of his life: "I am caught in a 24-hour identity I can't transcend." Here, changing sexes is not a liberation; Weber appears to always be both Albert-Michael and Sabina. "Talk to me as both," he says



Frame enlargement from *The Place Between Our Bodies* (1975) by Michael Wallen.

Weber. The film combines the black and white hand-held exploration of Weber's note-covered walls with saturated color clips from a '70s Russ Meyer film he appeared in. This is compounded by the continual run-on of his often brilliant ramblings, crammed onto the sound track or condensed into neat yellow intertitles that are flashed over screen images, often too quickly to read. The effect is dizzying, but it engages the viewer in a schizophrenia of mass consumption and excess that reflects that of its subject. Weber's existence is kinetic—glimpses of his rapid-fire expulsion of facts, thoughts and philosophies are barely discernible amid the continual drone

with a grin. And yet he has already declared, "Half of me is always hidden in suffering." *Communications from Weber* describes the accidental moments of insight within a landscape of over-communication, in which its subject is caught in the binging/purging, male/female schizophrenia we call postmodern.

The two films by San Francisco-based filmmaker Michael Wallen set up poles of self-imaging that vastly expand the boundaries of "the personal cinema." His first film, *The Place Between Our Bodies* (1975), seems to come from another planet, another epoch, in its frank and tender extrapolation of gay sexual hunger and the kindling

of a first relationship. The film is stridently pre-AIDS—much more so than any mid-'70s porno. This is partly because it is a personal film that discusses sexual hunger and love in a context that endows them with transcendent powers. It begins with Wallen describing his early frustrations with gay life and what he calls the "endless hunt." When he unexpectedly finds a boyfriend and begins his first sexual relationship, the film slows down, and concludes with an extended sex scene between the two men. Sexual love overcomes the plight of gay alienation and sexual hunger. And that is what begins to turn the film around, so that its most beautiful moments become its most painful. Wallen's indescribable expression during orgasm, and the enveloping tenderness with which he (unsafely) fucks his boyfriend, left me chilled with a sadness barely discernible beneath the usual tough-skinned attempt—on my part, on everyone's—to endure.

This sadness, this desire to read things retrospectively, is exemplified in the somber tones of his most recent film, *Decodings* (1988). The film is made up entirely of archival footage from what seem like 1940s and '50s educational films, a half-arch, half-poignant voice-over, and a track of music from Prokofiev. The text attributes coming-of-age rituals and boyhood bonding to glimpses of boys' school activities, competitions, experiments with mercury, and stunts in fire and water. A secret life of primordial love is implied, in addition to a mythical union among a tribe of "wild boys," like William Burroughs's. Stories of sexual encounters, and finally an account of a man and dog in search of storms, haunt the cleverness of the film's style. It concludes on a note of suburban despair—the possibility of an original moment from a collective unconscious—in which a boy, lying on the back-seat of his parents' car, discovers: "The trees are always there, they can be counted on. And nothing whatsoever can be counted on, nothing at all."

The new work by women presented this

(continued on page 20)

THE CONNOISSEURSHIP OF HYPE

EDWARD BALL

In 1975, Malcom McLaren was called a ber skirt.

"Impresario: Malcom McLaren and the British New Wave," a recent exhibition at the New Museum of Contemporary Art

was a difficult idea to sell.

redefine McLaren the promoter into McLaren the artist was in part an institutional critique of the whole apparatus.

PHOTOGRAPHY/INDEPENDENT FILM/VIDEO/VISUAL BOOKS AFTERIMAGE

VOLUME 16, NUMBER 5/DECEMBER 1988/\$2.75

A PUBLICATION OF THE VISUAL STUDIES WORKSHOP

cover modeled after the Manet painting *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1863). Such a reference to art history exemplifies McLaren's studied deployment of shock with an aesthete's delectation. Next the promoter cannibalized black hip-hop and rap, making his own music for the first time of citations from established styles: the 1984 *Fans* mixed a dance beat with opera, including *Carmen* and *Madame Butterfly*. Lately, McLaren has been developing *Fans* into a musical, slated to open on Broadway in 1989.

Even though our era is fully alert to the power of the "handler" and the public relations firm, the stage manager and the photo opportunity, few would think to suggest that McLaren's activities have had much to do with "art," though he did attend no fewer than four art academies as a young man. But then came Paul Taylor, curator of

the Thames River on a boat with the Sex Pistols as they sang their version of "God Save the Queen" (1977): "God save the Queen / The fascist regime / There is no future / And England's dreaming."

"Impresario" indeed drew big crowds, the largest ever for the New Museum, but also indifference and dismissals from the art world. At the opening, amid a crushing attendance of New York's bohemian sub-elite, for whom punk is one color in the palette of fashion personae, one museum-goer muttered, "I have a better collection at home in my closet." Apparently the art clan does not appreciate the category of "art" being publicly violated by comparisons with advertising and fashion, old concert posters and bondage trousers.

Unwittingly, perhaps, the New Museum had set itself up as the target for a McLarenesque provocation, which brought the dirt of non-art onto the stage of the art institution. The New Museum is known to have a preference for hermetic, anti-commercial work, and since the show tacitly celebrated McLaren's exploits as a profiteer, it



years like a young Jack Benny touched with megalomania, and carries the heaviest world-weariness you will ever encounter. "The Sex Pistols were my effort to live life in a waking dream. The dream lasted about two years." He paused with each phrase. "When it was over, all that remained was to collect every press clip we could find." McLaren dressed in tweed for the event, looking like a professor of literature at a minor private college and not the Rasputin of Rock that is his usual pose. With quivering hands gripping the lectern in the late morning hour, he cultivated the myth that now surrounds him: "From the earliest days of my youth, I have tried to be bad. I was only happy when things were going wrong. I remember being unhappy if things went as they were supposed to."

Such self-romanticism perturbed a handful of Trotskyite agitators in the crowd who, apparently attracted by punk's utopian element and its image of permanent revolution, had hoped for a meeting of minds on the broader social struggle. "You're a pissing shallow expropriator, McLaren! We know where you stand in the class struggle!" shouted one, disappointed. "I should've stayed home and watched *Soul Train*!" At

(continued on page 20)

EDWARD BALL is an investigator in the critical division of K&B Art, a New York partnership.

ARTS INTERVIEW

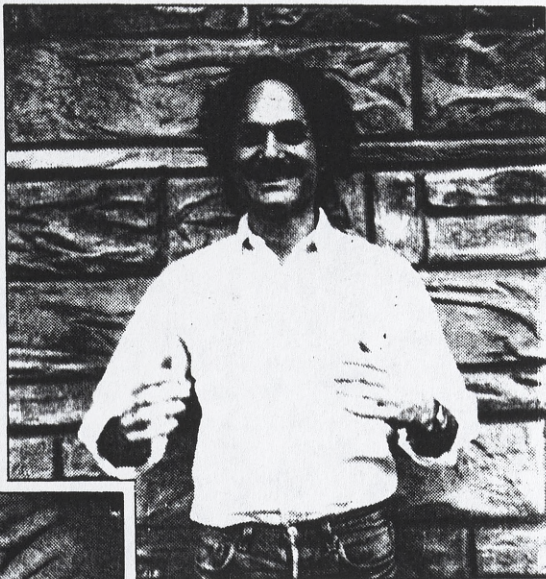
"Michael Wallin: Avant Garde, With Heart"

by David Nahmod

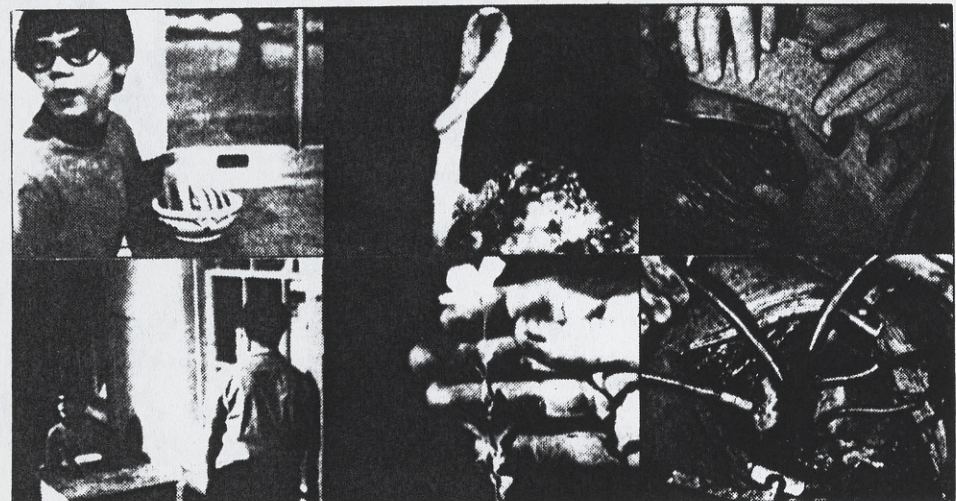
When he was 10 years old, Michael Wallin held a motion picture camera for the first time. He was on a European tour with his family, and they delegated to him the task of preserving their travels on film.

"The seeds of artistry were evident even then," Michael says now, some

performed by two people who are deeply in love, people whose souls connect as well as their bodies.



Filmmaker
Michael
Wallin



Montage of
scenes
from Wallin
movies

"The Place Between Our Bodies" is a highly emotional work, as it presents two sides of gay male sexuality in the years before AIDS. First we see the non-stop sexual mardi-gras that was then available in every nook and cranny, then the gay life that many of us dream of, of sex with someone you truly love, someone who returns that love wholeheartedly.

"The Place Between Our Bodies" has been shown to great acclaim at film festivals throughout the world, including several screenings at our own

annual Frameline Festival. After a few years on hiatus, Wallin has re-released it, and audiences seeing it now can look upon it as a remembrance of days gone by, when we were free to love one another without fear of illness.

Michael Wallin has made many more experimental films over the years. His latest, "Decodings" (1988) is an unusual, 15 minute short consisting exclusively of black and white documentary and newsreel footage of the '40s and '50s. The images seem unrelated, but Wallin's purpose with the film was to "decode" the images.

It's an interesting and unusual concept, and for his efforts Michael Wallin was recently awarded the 1988 James D. Phelan Arts Award for filmmaking, which is given annually to California born filmmakers.

In the future, Wallin might want to experiment with producing more narrative films. "I'm anxious to get back to shooting," he says. "I want to try using my own unique style on a narrative piece. So many Hollywood films follow conventional, unchallenging formulas. They're very manipulative. I want to do a narrative piece that is visually and intellectually stimulating. I want to create images, characters and stories that last."

He's a talented, driven and emotional man. It will be interesting to see what the future holds for Michael Wallin and his camera.

thirty years later. "I could not take shots in an ordinary way, I wanted the film to look interesting. I would shoot travelogues at odd, dramatic angles, and would place the focal point of the shot at the edge, instead of the center of the frame."

The magic of the moving image continued to fascinate him all through his childhood and into adulthood. In the '60s, while studying at Yale, he decided that he had to find some creative courses to counterbalance the standard, rigorous curriculum of the school. He found a beginning film course, and a very interesting course on experimental film. He himself began experimenting with films.

P. Adams Sitney, a Yale graduate student at the time (he is now considered the main theoretician of avant-garde film) brought an astounding variety of experimental film artists to the school to show and discuss their works. Wallin learned first hand from filmmakers like Stan Brakhage, Taylor Meade, Kenneth Anger and others on the art of experimental film.

He saw an early French avant garde classic, "Un Chant d'Amour" (a song of love) made by Jean Genet in 1952. It was a poetic evocation of men in prison and their longings for intimacy.

"It was a very sexual film and it affected me profoundly," Wallin says. "It was the first time I had ever seen homoerotic images."

"Kenneth Anger's 'Scorpio Rising' (1965) was also for me, potently erotic. It depicted images of the dark side of sexuality and sexuality's power. The way it was edited and composed awakened me to the potential of film to evoke entire worlds through a succession of images without narrative form."

It was works such as these that influenced one of Wallin's earliest works, "The Place Between Our Bodies" (1975). It is a pre-AIDS exploration of gay male sexuality, and is a fascinating work. As the thirty minute film begins, we are treated to a succession of images from San Francisco's recent past. Polk and Folsom Streets in the mid '70s, the long defunct Tom Cat Theatre, adult bookstores, some of which no longer exist. As these shots flash before us, Wallin speaks, of camera, about the "sexual hunt" that was so prevalent in gay life at the time. The obsession with physical gratification.

Midway through the film Wallin speaks of unexpectedly finding a lover, and the rest of the film consists of Wallin and his lover together, picking flowers in the nude, and performing hardcore sex on camera. But this isn't the raw, "ram it in" sex usually found in porn films. This is gentle lovemaking,

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FILM

Sex, sexuality, eroticism and desire

By GREGG BORDOWITZ

The films in the second annual New York Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival open up questions about our lives, our loves, our histories and our futures as lesbians and gays. The film festival, curated by Jim Hubbard and Sarah Schulman, also shows how the diversity of lesbian and gay experiences can pose radical questions about the whole "experimental film" genre.

Jim Hubbard's "Stop the Movie (Cruising)" makes us think about our activism. It is a bare bones documentation of the demonstrations against the making of the movie "Cruising." The film varies in color, light and texture—Hubbard's camera is more interested in faces and relationships. His frames exclude and fragment signs and banners, leaving the viewer to observe in silence the expressions and gestures of the demonstrators. This disarming technique puts the focus on the psychology of political events, and on the feelings and motivations of the demonstrators.

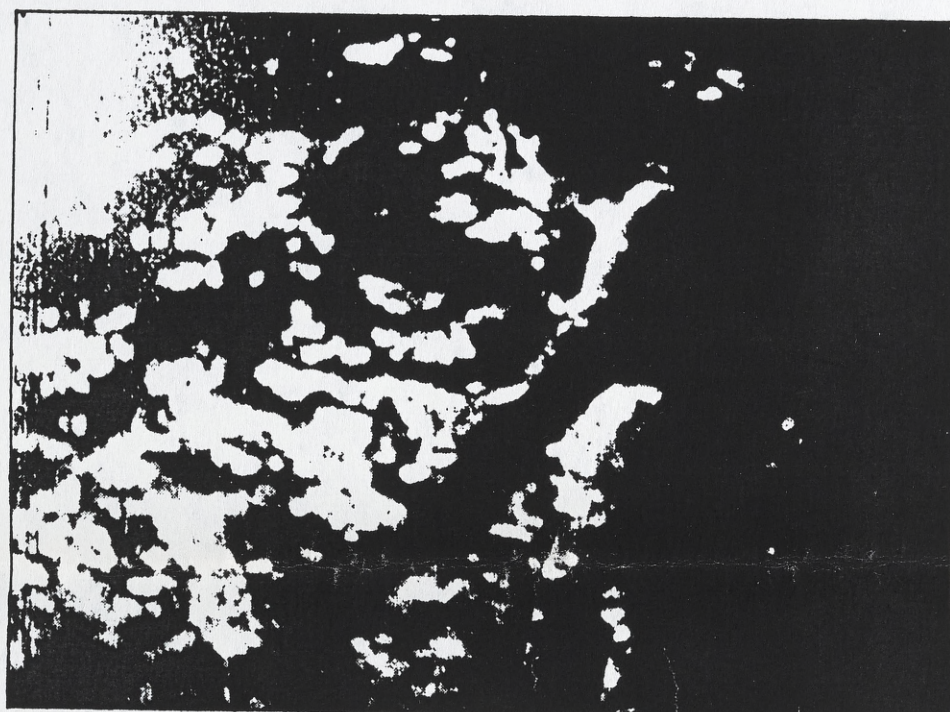
"Working Class Chronicle" by Jack Walsh is a personal history, a chronological account of the years 1954-1969 that is structured like a dream. The film is a collage of audio and visual material culled from mass media, mass culture and personal documentation. All this is brought together in a way that allows the filmmaker to reclaim the images as his own. Walsh's film reveals the contradictions experienced by a gay male growing up in a fiercely heterosexual culture during a period of radical social change.

GAY LOVE NOT WAR

Similarly, in Mike Kuchars's film diary of three months of his life during the late 1960s—"Chronicles"—scenes of two men making love are juxtaposed against footage of fighter planes shot off the TV. As engine sounds and bomb blasts fill the soundtrack, one of the men cums on the other's face. The message: Make gay love not war! Images of homes, friends and art works are combined with a musical soundtrack presenting a dense account of Kuchars's experiences.

Dreams are the material for Sue Friedrichs's "Gently Down the Stream." Written descriptions of dreams scratched onto film allow the viewer to "narrate" the film as she/he reads the words and watches the images appear on the screen. The film calls attention to the psychological process of film-viewing—and emotion is part of the process.

The dreamlike "Walking with M" by Ruth Gummit is a short black-and-white depiction of a walk with somebody. A moving camera wanders over compositions formed by objects, architecture and landscape, settling on the face of a friendly smiling woman. The exploring camera creates a playful, contemplative mood that is framed by the relationship between the smiling subject and the person behind the cam-



Gay film festival: top, 'Jabbok,' by Tom Chomont; above, Barbara Hammer making her new film 'Endangered Species.'

era. You are left to wonder who this person is and what is the nature of their relationship.

Sex, sexuality, eroticism and desire—this festival has it all. In "No No Nooky T.V.," Barbara Hammer skillfully uses an Amiga computer and a bolex to consider the erotic nature of viewing, of film, and of technology.

The film confronts us with electric, computer-animated, sexually explicit words and phrases that challenge our feelings about the phrases themselves and the way they are presented.

In "A.I.D.S.C.R.E.A.M." Jerry Tartaglia angrily poses questions about homophobia and how AIDS has wrongly been construed as a

"gay disease." The most rage-filled moment is a hand-held pan over a roomful of smiling men looking at the camera. The voice on the soundtrack states, "These are my friends. They are dead. Are their lives worth less than any others?" Throughout the short film, the voice on the soundtrack coldly states how AIDS has been used to repress gay sexuality. The film's brutally frank tone contrasts with Tom Chomont's "Jabbok" (1965), a spiritual, homo-erotic film with beautiful boys, water and light.

Films that depict gay male sexuality have been tacitly separated into two distinct categories—before AIDS and after AIDS. AIDS has permanently altered our lives but it has not reduced our capacity to live full lives. Still, sometimes viewing films made before the epidemic can be a threatening experience—it can seem as if we have lost the opportunity to celebrate our sexuality.

But watching a film like Mike Wallin's "The Place Between Our Bodies" (1974) can be an affirmative experience. This film considers the richness of gay male desire, gay male love, gay male sex. A first person voice-over account of the "aesthetics" of cruising gives way to conversations between two lovers. Images of men passing by on the street, porn snapshots, a man masturbating and sexy naked men give way to images of two lovers—the filmmaker and a significant other. "The Place Between Our Bodies" is a first-person documentary informed by both film verité and direct cinema. The camera is hand-held and self-reflexively present. The soundtrack is narrated by the filmmaker himself at first, and then by him and his lover. There is a beautifully shot, hot sex scene that seems to be shot in real time. When they both reach orgasm you want to clap. After the scene the two frolic naked in a garden—only in San Francisco. Wallin's film renders gay love as it exists, then and now, a tangible reality.

Premiered in the festival is Barbara Hammer's "Endangered Species," a complicated film in which every image is marked and cancelled before it disappears. Images of the filmmaker at work are paralleled with images of seals in nature; art and nature are viewed as linked. The film is resigned to a grim future.

More hopeful is John Greyson's "A Maffie called Simon." This is a tribute to Simon Nkoli, a black gay activist in South Africa, on trial for treason. This film addresses the racism and homophobia within liberation movements with scripted scenes, voice-over and documentation.

In total, the festival will show 62 films by 58 filmmakers—a challenging selection of films that point to the most pressing issues facing lesbians and gays now. As Schulman sums it up, "People think experimental film is narrow. No way!"

The Second New York Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival will be Sept. 13-18 at Millenium, New York City.

Ceremony at Kabuki Theater on Dec. 12

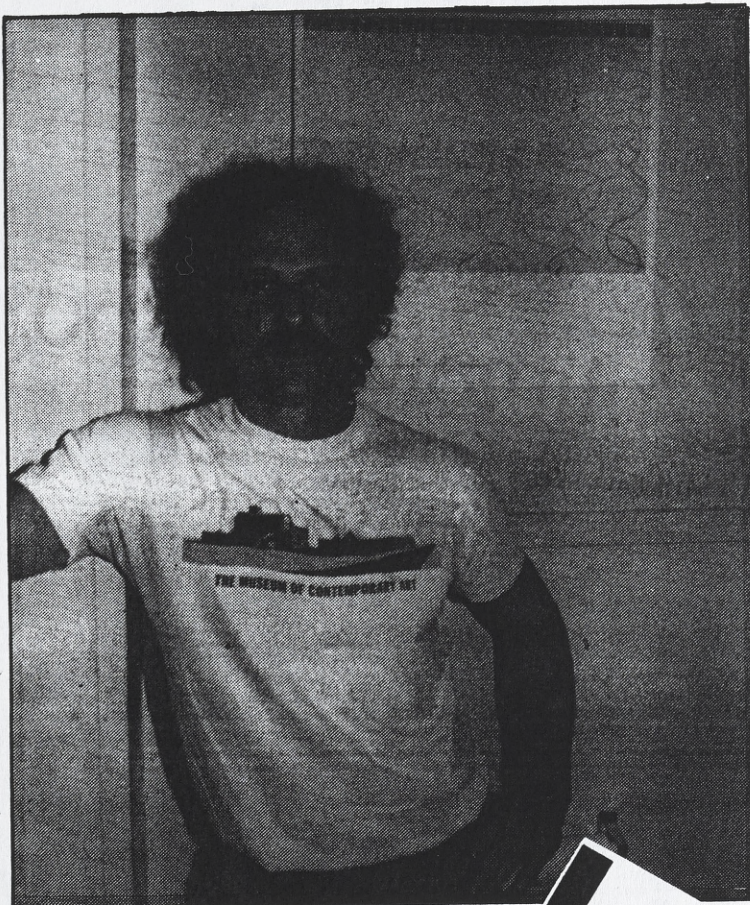
Michael Wallin To Be Honored With Phelan Arts Award

by Robert Frank

A San Francisco-based gay filmmaker named Michael Wallin will be honored with the James D. Phelan Arts Award for film on Monday, Dec. 12 at the Kabuki Theatre, where two of his well-regarded experimental films will be screened that same evening. The two films which were shown two months ago at the San Francisco Cinematheque, are *Along the Way* (1983), "a visual journal, a personal travelogue, a filmic diary," and *Decodings* (1988), "an emotional, psycho-sexual self-portrait told in the third person and filtered through anecdote and parable."

Decodings already has earned him one of four Grand Prizes for Independent Film at the Thomas Edison Black Maria Film Festival, a large independent/experimental film fest recently held at the Thomas Edison National Historic Site in New Jersey. The films are being considered for screenings next year at the Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley.

Wallin began his filmmaking career at Yale University in the



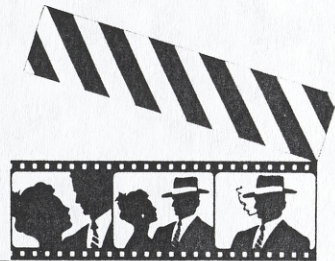
Michael Wallin.

late 1960s with film history courses and working with 8mm film. P. Adams Sitney was an influence on him at Yale, as were visiting experimental/avant-garde filmmakers Stan Brakhage, Michael Snow, Kenneth Anger (of *Scorpio Rising* fame) and Taylor Mead, who worked with Andy Warhol at that time.

After two years at Yale he transferred to Berkeley. Of great importance to his filmmaking career was the summer of '68, spent at the Mendocino Arts Center under the guidance of Bruce Baillie, a "giant of independent filmmakers." Wallin says his first films were made there that summer, in 8mm, now blown up to 16mm. A great influence on him was James Broughton, creator of "Devotions" and a teacher of the "best course I had," during the time he attended San Francisco State from 1971-75. Among other admired filmmakers, Wallin mentioned the internationally famous, prolific, gay German film director, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, who died too young, noting particularly *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*, *The Bitter Tears of Petra Von Kant* and

In the Year of the Thirteen Moons.

Wallin goes into more detail in expressing his admiration and high regard for critically acclaimed French film director, Robert Bresson (*Diary of a Country Priest*). According to Wallin, Bresson is not an actor's director. "Actors are models," said Wallin, [and are] "not to act out" their roles. The French director, he says, "demands participation by the viewer [who is] not being spoon fed or preached to." Wallin speaks of the spiritual quality of Bresson's films, which are usually about the "struggle of the outsider, often being persecuted."



Wallin's own films have received critical praise, most recently at the Second Annual New York Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival in September. The Village Voice said *Decodings* "is a profoundly moving, allegorical search for identity from the documents of collective memory. ... Tales of wandering and searching are set to images of young boys boxing, praying, playing. Men perform feats of danger and abandon ... The search for self ends in aching poignancy with stills of a boy and his mother at the kitchen table, catching the moment that marks the dawning of anguish and loss; desire becomes imprinted on that which was long ago."

According to Wallin, "*Along The Way* is both a reminiscence and an on-going investigation into the nature of 'place.' Powerful (and painful) events in my life during the period of the film's completion certainly influenced its final emotional tone. It seems at times an elegy to my relationship with a lover."

As for *Decoding*, the still-youthful, softspoken Wallin offers more background information. The music employed is Shostakovich. The written portion, a voice-over, is the result of a collaboration with a writer/doctor who is a life-long friend. "Human behavior, rituals and customs, and learning processes are encoded in its media records, film among them," said Wallin, "isolating images from their original context, then re-combining them in new relationships intrigued me as a way of stripping the images of their rabidly processed messages, of decoding them."

"This 'collage' or 'found footage' film," he added, "draws from educational and scientific films, newsreels and documentaries primarily from the late Forties through the early Sixties. My choice of imagery seemed to be motivated by an unconscious search for elements that related to my own past, for clues to a self-discovery. My concerns had to do with, for example, the kind of relationships possible between men, the possibilities for and barriers to intimacy, control and release, the ability to love and be loved."

The Phelan Award ceremony, sponsored by the Film Arts Foundation, begins at 7 p.m. Admission is free, but the FAF says RSVPs should be called in at 552-8760 as quickly as possible because seating is limited. ▼

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FILM

REVIEWED BY SKYE MORRISON

An explosion of films, videos, documentaries and panel discussions marked the "Women of the Americas" film festival recently opened in San Francisco. The first of its kind in the United States, this festival is a recognition that women all over Latin America are not only finding their own voices, but are mastering a medium to get their message out. And these messages blow the stereotypes of women — and particularly Latina women — wide open.

There was so much happening at the festival that it was impossible to see it all — although it was all worth seeing. During this five-day event (Oct. 19-23), over 50 works were screened, including five feature films. Many filmmakers traveled here to show their works in person and to participate in the panel discussions that were an important part of the festival.

In a montage of languages — Spanish, English, Portuguese — and in both structured public panel discussions and over informal lunches in the local cafes, women representing 15 countries of the Americas shared the experiences of their work and their struggles.

The festival was organized by Cine Accion, a non-profit group dedicated to promoting the production, distribution and understanding of Latino film and video in the U.S. Some members in the group had begun talking about putting together a Latin American Women's Film Festival about two years ago, but it wasn't until recently that the idea really took off.

"Some of the women in Cine Accion called attention to the fact that in the Latin film festivals Latinas were not being represented equally. In the festival we did last summer there was only one film by a woman out of the ten films that were shown," said Elaine Vergelin, one of the festival coordinators.

Latinas have been equally ignored in women's film festivals. The West Coast organization, Women in Film, recently put on a big film festival in Hollywood and didn't include even one film produced by a Latina. "They did the festival by invitation only. In other words you could only submit your work to be considered if they invited you to do so. But there were a lot of unknown women involved in film in Latin America. What we did was to write letters throughout Latin America, asking the women we had contact with, asking them to spread the word about what was going on. We began to get submissions and we had never heard of the festival before."

The festival was held at the Cultural Center in San Francisco. In Berkeley, the place was in time, and panels. But other groups and none of the enthusiasm went away disappointed.

The five feature films were all striking — even raw — in their condemnation of the taken-for-granted social order. Culturally sensitive issues were dealt with in a brave and open manner. Commendably, the films managed to have a definite entertainment value while refusing to sidestep the real message the filmmakers were trying to get across.

In *Macu: The Policeman's Wife*, Venezuelan



A scene from "Macu: The Policeman's Wife"

filmmaker Solveign Hoogesteijn tells the story of a young girl who is in a sense 'sold' to a much older man to be his wife at the age of 12. Hoogesteijn said she felt driven to write the script and produce the film after reading a story in the newspaper similar to the one she says it is not uncommon in Latin America for young girls to be given away in marriage.

The film explores the life of a poor, illiterate girl trapped in a marriage that doesn't want to a man who dominates over her, jealous — even having affairs with other women. She falls in love with a man who is a band leader, but his wife is a friend of her mother's.

The film reveals to us that young girls are sold into the role of a wife, the overwhelming poverty of the country, and the power is often the man and her family may be in life. Thus she sells herself into bondage as a prostitute.

Macu was the biggest box office success the country's ever had. Hoogesteijn says it's because the people of her country could so deeply relate to the issues and characters portrayed.

Not surprisingly, all of these films were made for a tiny fraction of the cost of a movie in the U.S. Susana Amaral's Brazilian movie, *Hour of the Star*, was completed in seven weeks for \$150,000. And *Macu* was made for only \$70,000. With this relatively minute amount of money these women did truly remarkable things!

A totally different facet of the festival was the multitude of videos and documentaries showcased. Most of Saturday was devoted to videos about the situation in Central America. On Sunday afternoon we were treated to videos from Brazil. And that evening to end the festival there was a special program on videos about women artists.

"Many of these videos and documentaries can't be shown in their own countries. A lot

cinema. Here in the United States we have to deal with racism, we have to deal with money. And since we're immigrants we want to be safe — which means not getting into films," Portillo said.

In *Chicana Filmmaking: What are the strengths? What are the obstacles?* an entire panel was set up to discuss these issues in depth.

"There we put States Chi v

because even though out the United States done by missions. mented whole making don't we olem? What we get past

Portillo sees it again Latinas who come here America generally have Chicanas just don't have access," she said.

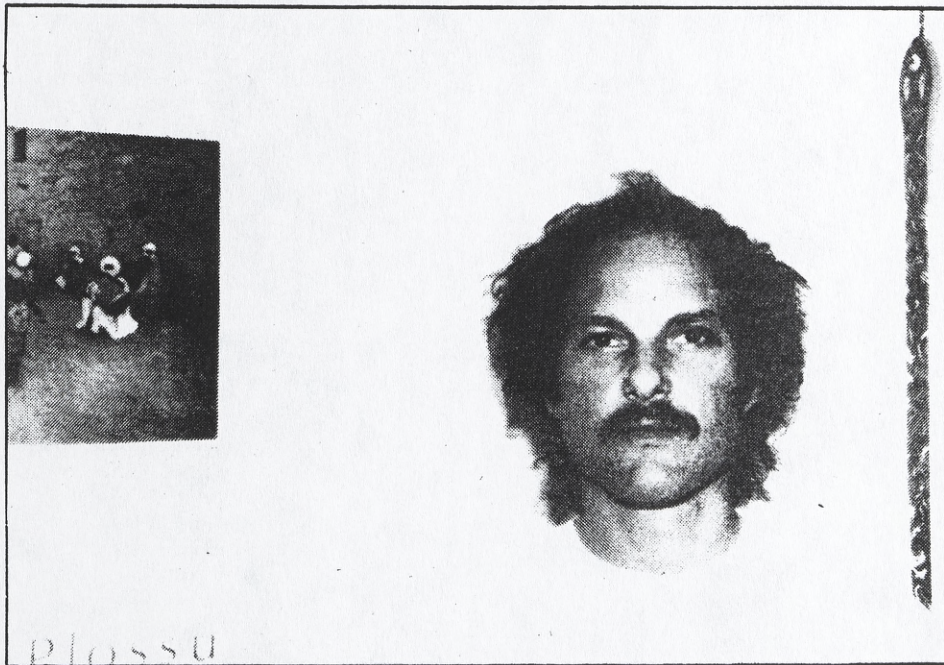
five days came to an end. Cine Accion say that audience was even greater than they had hoped filmmakers and would-be filmmakers new connections, networks were polished, friendships made. An exhausted Elaine Vergelin said that she and Liz Kotz, the other program coordinator, now plan to create a reference book so that other groups can build on what's been started here. "The thing I see about this festival is not only that there were some great films shown, but that these women had something to say and are saying it. They're not doing fluff pieces or going for the money," Vergelin said.

In next month's issue of *Coming Up!* we will take an in-depth look at Latinas and Chicanas in film.

The Films of Michael Wallin: A Review

REVIEWED BY JERRY TARTAGLIA

If lesbians and gays have anything to learn from American Teleculture (Hollywood movies and Television), it may be that the conventional moving image art forms attempt to direct has been our emotional responses. As an actor-president Ronald Reagan has been an adept at this technique. Whenever he smacks his parched lips, cocks his head to screen right, and gurgles, "Well..." Reagan is providing his TV audience with a series of visual and aural codes intended to convey the image of "the



Filmmaker Michael Wallin

wise old man, telling the plain truth." Such patterns of sounds, gestures and images form the basis of the oftentimes unconscious rituals of daily life which we learn to enact from the moving image art forms.

American males are taught a very specific kind of pattern, and in his new personal film, *Decodings*, gay filmmaker Michael Wallin attempts to deconstruct these male rituals and the images of male interaction. This film was premiered at the Second New York Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival in September; and last month Wallin presented it during his one-person show at the San Francisco Cinematheque. *Decodings* (1988, 15 min, B&W/Sound) consists of images which Wallin collected from educational, newsreel, documentary and science films of the forties, fifties, and sixties. He recombined the images into a new montage, and by isolating the visual activities of males, he liberated the images from their original "coded" content. The soundtrack, written by Michael Blumlein, consisted of a series of very emotionally moving narratives which inevitably wrenched the "meanings" of the images in the found footage into a new context.

One aural sequence, for example, told of a tribe of desert-dwelling men who grew younger and younger, until they eventually became seeds and then pure thought — while their mutual collective love provided hope for others. This story was being told by a Marine. The narrator asked the Marine to drop his pants, and he said, he did, and he blew him.

Obviously this is not the kind of thought and image sequence which can be found in the average American Teleculture movie. Wallin is attempting to "decode" the imagic barriers to male intimacy and he succeeds through the depth and variety of feelings which he generates in *Decodings*. He described the film as a "psychosexual self portrait," and as such, it is a living document of an American gay identity. It isn't intended to prove to the great unwashed heterosexual public that gay men are just like everyone else. Instead, Michael Wallin helps us examine consciousness through his camera and aims toward truth rather than toward image.

It reminded me of Abigail Child's 1984 film *Covert Action*, which was finally shown in this year's San Francisco Lesbian and Gay Film Festival. Both films use found footage; both deal with the deconstruction of the language of human gesture, and both films point toward the erotic "codings" in the moving image. Michael's film, however, touched my heart and sparked an emotional response in me, whereas Child's film set me thinking about gesture and human interrelationship.

Another of other works in the program at Cinematheque revealed his roots as a personal, experimental filmmaker. *Sleepwalk* (1973, 12min, color/sound) was conceptually related to *Decodings*, in that this earlier film explores gesture and idiosyncratic human movements, especially among the filmmaker's friends. He shot these images himself, then manipulated them through the optical printer, to repeat the gestures, or slow down the movements. I enjoyed this film because it was short, well paced, and created an intimate and lovely portrait of the relationship between the filmmaker-as-camera and his friends.

Wallin's *Monitoring the Unstable Earth* (1980, 20min, color/sound) was the least enjoyable film on the program. He tried to create an awareness of "being present" while visually detaching the viewer from the land and cityscape images. In this film, Wallin's camera was noticeably felt as an obstacle between viewer and image. Unfortunately, alienation does not stimulate the act of seeing. In American experimental cinema, the landscape genre enjoyed a brief flowering in the seventies, and in my opinion, Michael Snow's *La Region Centrale* was among the earliest and best of the lot. Michael Wallin's art, on the other hand, is vivified by his emotionally conscious vision. He would do well to leave the alienated structuralist methods to the academic filmmakers who spend their lives in classrooms. Michael

Wallin is thankfully too heart felt an artist to succeed at that type of boredom.

The earliest film on the program was called *Tall Grass* (1968, 12min, color/silent). He shot it as a *homage* to his friend and teacher, Bruce Baillie, using regular 8mm and blowing it up to 16mm on the optical printer. The film showed its age as the camera went on an innocent romp with his friends in the hills of Mendocino County. Many of the early experimental film techniques are used: multiple exposures, short shots, rapid jarring pans. But *Tall Grass* was fun to watch because, owing to the compact size of the 8mm camera, the viewer felt the subjective movement as if we were part of the filmmaker's body. This technique turns up in many experimental films. Sometimes, as in Barbara Hammer's works *Pond and Waterfall* (1982) and *Parisian Blinds* (1984) it is consciously employed as a shooting strategy: the camera becomes an extension of the body. Lesbian and gay film artists like Barbara Hammer

and Michael Wallin, when they use the camera as an extension of the body rather than as a vehicle interposed *between* self and world, are reflecting the gay person's potential for connection between self and other.

Another emotionally revealing film in Michael's show was *Along the Way* (1983, 20 min, color/sound). Wallin seems to have conceived of this film with some of the formalist strategies in mind which he used in *Monitoring the Unstable Earth*. The difference here comes from a healthy breaking through of emotional content in combination with structural awareness. In this film we don't sense that he is "trying to create a landscape film." Instead, he allows the landscape to be enhanced by human emotion, and to my eye, that makes it more of a diary film. Apparently he made the film during a break-up with his lover and some of the images are reminiscences of desire or lingering pain.

Michael Wallin has been a filmmaker for

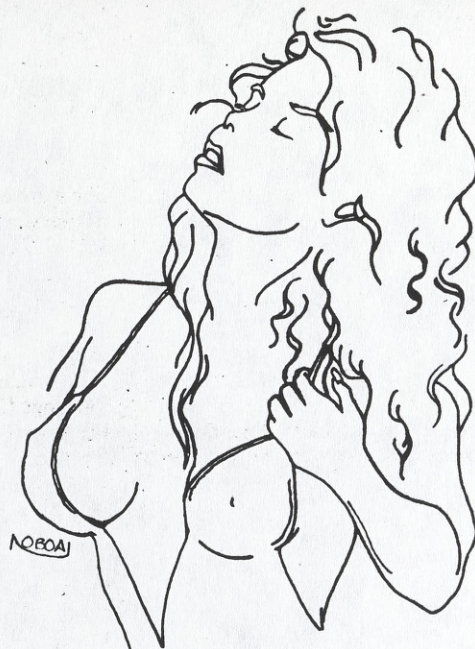
twenty years. Last month he was a recipient of the James D. Phelan Award, presented to native California filmmakers. He is probably best known for his 1975 film, *The Place Between Our Bodies*, which was a sexual and psychological portrait of male lovers. Like most lesbian and gay personal filmmakers, his work has been largely ignored by both the straight experimental film establishment and the gay feature film festival circuit. Hopefully this trend is changing as our community slowly comes to understand the value of our own lesbian and gay artists. We need to see more films like those of Michael Wallin because his work is both pleasant to watch, and also instructive. His films help us to understand the ways in which coded messages are transmitted to us through movies.

Coming up this month at Cinematheque on November 10th is James Broughton's 75th birthday show featuring films by him and his lover, Joel Singer.



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